

The politics and aesthetics of luxury in Africa

Simidele Dosekun and Mehita Iqani

Some might assume that the phrase 'African luxury' is an oxymoron, along with the notion that Africans are the *consumers* of said luxury. At the time of this writing, entering the search keywords 'Africa' and 'luxury' into Google Scholar resulted not in scholarly work that engaged critically, or indeed otherwise, with how luxury consumer cultures play out in African settings, but rather in numerous articles that use the idea of 'luxury' as a rhetorical device to ask whether certain developmental needs are necessities or nice-to-haves for Africans. For example, the question is raised of whether the availability of adolescent psychiatry is a 'luxury' for African communities (Robertson et al., 2010), and it is also considered how, in certain Aids-stricken African contexts, it might be a 'luxury' to grieve for loved ones lost to the disease (Demmer, 2007).

While there is extensive scholarship examining various aspects of contemporary consumer cultures and identities in Africa, including those of elite actors and demographics (Dosekun, 2019; Gott, 2009; Huigen, 2017; Iqani, 2015), and those centered on expensive goods – and indeed their symbolic destruction, in the case of the South African township culture, *izikhotane* (Howell and Vincent, 2014) – 'luxury' has been little considered as a distinct category thus far, moreover as distinct from 'conspicuous consumption.' Some attention to luxury can be found in work on other global South locations – often, tellingly, more in relation to so-called 'new' middle classes than the 'elites' or 'super-elites' of concern in the global North (Brosius, 2012; Fernandes, 2006; Lange and Meier, 2009; Southall, 2016). There is, for example, work on luxury accommodation in gated communities in Bangalore, India (Upadhy, 2009); on the growing popularity of luxury golf courses in China (Zhang et al., 2009); and on middle class Thai consumers' savvy expenditure on affordable 'fast fashion,' complemented with 'substantial investments in expensive Western branded goods – a Prada bag, a pair of Gucci sunglasses,' which gives them entry into elite consumer spaces, and which are often resold or traded at 'luxury goods exchanges' (Arvidsson and Niessen, 2015: 9; Wattanasuwan, 1999). At the same time, in both the larger and more established body of scholarship on luxury from business, marketing and management studies (Cavender and Kincade, 2014; Dubois and Duquesne, 1993; Kapferer and Bastien, 2012; Truong et al., 2008), and in the emergent field of critical luxury studies concerned with the cultural and other politics of what is contemporarily deemed luxury (Armitage and Roberts, 2016; Featherstone, 2014), the focus is almost exclusively on the global North.

African Luxury: Aesthetics and Politics emerges from, and begins to fill, these multi-sided gaps. With original case studies spanning the continent, from Togo to the former Zaire to Angola, the book moves beyond predominant imaginaries of Africa as a place to be 'saved' or 'aided,' as well as more recent, teleological formulations of it as 'rising,' to foreground and also historicize different extant forms of the production, consumption and representation of wealth, indulgence and lavishness on the continent, including self-declared luxury brands, services and industries. We take it that, however precisely defined, luxury very much

matters. It matters in our contemporary global moment of extreme income inequality; in a world in which we speak routinely of not just 'the 1%' but smaller fractions thereof and, conversely, of 'surplus' or 'disposable populations,' the many (and rising) on the sharp end of 'neoliberalism's power to define who matters and who doesn't, who lives and who dies' (Giroux, 2008: 594). If in even the wealthiest and officially democratic of societies, 'food banks and Ferraris coexist in close proximity' (Armitage and Roberts, 2016: 1), luxury becomes a matter demanding close scholarly attention, and critique.

As John Armitage and Joanne Roberts (2016, 14) write in their delineation of critical luxury studies as an emergent, interdisciplinary field, one in which we situate this book, luxury is a site of power and of struggle. Luxury, in the first place, is a difficult property to define and fix, being highly relative and contextual. Literally, the word points to the non-essential, to that which is desired rather than strict necessity, although this boundary between need and wants is cleverly blurred by marketers. The tag of luxury assigns considerable symbolic meaning, rendering its referents not only symbols of wealth and status but also of the consumer's personality, taste, and ability to access a world of exclusivity and superiority, from the craftsmanship of material goods to rarefied experiences of leisure. At the same time, luxuries are 'things which have power over us'; 'by offering a range of pleasures' they sway and move us (Featherstone, 2014: 48). Luxury can serve, then, as a site, and method, to pose and answer critical questions *about* power. Through luxury we can trace, theorize and, in and across divergent sites, connect the complex political economic, social, cultural and also subjective workings of global neoliberalism capitalism. Luxury points our attention to the sensory and affective, too, including as newly intensified realms of commodification and economic value (Böhme, 2003).

From African and other global Southern perspectives, luxury also matters, and reveals, because the inequalities that enter necessarily into its meanings and marks centrally include the geopolitical. A key question that arises is the extent to which the very idea of luxury today, as well as the kinds of brands and commodities most associated with it, are wedded to ideas of the 'global,' and the 'Western' more specifically, such that global luxury economies can be considered new sites and vehicles of cultural imperialism. A cursory observation of elite consumer practices and tastes in key African cities might seem to confirm the cultural imperialism thesis: what we see most typically and visibly construed as luxury includes French champagne, Italian suits and fashion labels, American-style malls, German sports cars, private jets and the like. In recent years, Western media outlets have also begun to see and take an interest in African elites and their spectacular consumption, often focusing on their travels to, and lifestyles in, the West – often in a patronizing and scandalous tone. 'The Nigerians Have Arrived' declares a 2014 article in *Tatler* magazine, for instance, that goes on to detail how much the wealthiest among them have been rumoured to spend on champagne in nightclubs (over a million pounds), how many properties they own in the choicest of London neighbourhoods and the like (Jenkins, 2014). The British television station, Channel 4, followed up two years later with a documentary entitled *Lagos to London: Britain's New Super-Rich*. As discussed in **Mehita Iqani's** chapter in this book, global firms are also beginning to recognize

that there are 'high net worth individuals' on the continent, and thus luxury customers to be curried there, markets to be developed and exploited.

The time is thus ripe, we believe, to pose critical questions about what exactly luxury means in and concerning Africa today: What does it consist of? Where does it reside? From where does it originate, and for whom is it available? How is it represented and contested? What are its politics, economics and stylistics? The collection does not pose such questions with a prior or strict definition or demarcation of luxury, in reference to particular brands or types of goods, Dior and diamonds say. Rather it takes an exploratory approach, concerned precisely with what emerges in the name of luxury in relation to Africa as both a material and imagined place, understanding luxury as ultimately performative and perspectival. All the chapters proceed with notions and cases that variously encompass and emphasise values, signs and promises of 'first-class' quality, desirability and discernment, cultural elitism, expensive price points and scarcity. But in and by broaching and seeking to theorise these things from Africa, we do proceed with a series of political and historicized premises about the mere conjuncture of luxury *and* Africa, namely that the former is not antithetical, foreign, or new to the latter.

Methodologically, conceptually and analytically, this starts us beyond taken-for-granted ideas that the West is the source and focus, beginning and end, of high-end, hyper-desirable, expensive material cultures. A central contribution of *African Luxury* – and this not only in relation to our particular continent – is to challenge and retheorize Eurocentric assumptions about what luxury is and how it comes to have value. Attuned instead to the fact of African agency and tastes, markets and histories, allows us to see and acknowledge unique and innovative processes of commodity production and cultures and forms of consumption on the ground, from the aspirational to the actual, and from the local to the regional and global. 'African luxury,' as we call it heuristically, is equal in aesthetic if not economic and cultural stature to other formations of luxury, and it plays a constitutive role in the contemporary global luxury economy and its politics.

The roots and routes of African luxury

Luxury, as we have begun to say above, is contrary to neither Africa nor 'African-ness.' Regardless of Western or other perceptions, Africa is a place in which luxury is meaningful in more than simply metaphorical and watered-down ways, and in which luxurious commodities, experiences, spaces and practices have long been part of the cultural, moral and physical landscapes. From the intricately hand-woven, wild silk textiles of West Africa to early forms of gold mining and metal-craft in Southern Africa, from the elaborate, bespoke forms of jewellery and adornment across the continent to the monumental architecture of North Africa, Africa is rich in cultural and aesthetic forms of sumptuous materiality. And as these few examples suggest, this luxury is not only available to, or extracted for, others, whether in the form of export to wealthier parts of the

world, or for wealthy visitors to come and experience adventure. It is inherently addressed to and embraced by Africans.

Pre-colonial luxury consumption was tied to both royal and charismatic authority, and manifest in and communicated via such indigenous values and materialities as volume or bulk (Boyer, 1983), sheen (Douny, 2013), exclusivity and cosmopolitanism (Gott, 2009). This last value is especially important to underscore because, as remains the case today, luxury in Africa has often been imbricated often with the new, foreign and 'exotic,' and thus with trade and exchange from near and far, from North, East and West, by sea and by land (Gott, 2009; Prestholdt, 2007). The transatlantic slave trade, and later European colonial conquest, significantly impacted African cultures and practices of luxury consumption and production. On the one hand, they continued and deepened the integration of the continent into world markets, and with this continued and proliferated the supply of new luxuries on the ground – new fabrics and items of dress, new domestic and cosmetic goods, new alcohols and so on, which, as this indicative list would suggest, were deeply gendered (e.g. see Weinbaum et al. 2008). Access to such things was also increasingly expanded, or levelled, by the erosional effect of both colonial rule and market forces on customary sumptuary regulations (e.g. Gott 2009; Prestholdt 2009). At the same time, as with other European colonies, those in Africa were reorganized for extraction above all, thus becoming key sources of the raw materials, labourers and repatriated profit that drove modern consumer cultures in colonial metropolises. A key example is cocoa, which has since become a staple good, no longer a rarity, across the world (Leissle, 2012, 2018).

Roberta Sassatelli notes that the 'thirst for luxury' (Sassatelli, 2007: 25) was a key factor in the rise of new retail geographies in European cities during the industrial revolution, and that this played a key role in colonial expansion and commerce:

[A] large part of the goods which make up the growth in demand of early modernity are precisely [...] non-essential goods [...] in particular spices and drugs, perfumes, dyes, silk and linen, precious stones and then, from the late 16th century onwards, sugar, coffee, tea and cocoa (Sassatelli, 2007: 21).

Mike Featherstone (2014: 50) writes, similarly, that 'European luxury demand was a crucial factor in opening up the Americas' – for the conquest of the Americas we would call it. If we consider the 'intimacies of four continents' (Lowe, 2015) – the mutually structured and productive linkages between European trade and later colonial forays in the East Indies, China and Africa, settler colonialism in the Americas, the enslavement of Africans and later indenturing of East and South Asians to toil in the 'New World,' and the rise of Euro-American modernity – we see that Africa is in fact at the constitutive heart and base of the very concept of 'modern luxury.' It must also be noted that the continent was also a source of luxury for others long before the times to which we are referring, here: Arab traders were crossing the Sahara in search of gold from the Ancient Kingdom of Ghana as early as the 9th century, for instance (Hilson, 2002). Modern luxury has nonetheless become naturalized or 'propertized' as Euro-American through its globalisation and due to the exercise

of political-economic power acquired through colonial expansion and oppression; and it is on this basis that, in some quarters, Africans' desires or moves to also partake of luxury is considered imitative, derivative, and so on.

In this book, we reject notions that Africans' pursuit and acquisition of luxury amounts to cultural mimicry or loss on our side, and Western cultural imperialism on the other side. These positions are ahistorical, simplistic and disciplinary. We also seek to complicate related suggestions that where and when Africans partake of luxury or other forms of expensive or sizeable consumption, it boils down to 'conspicuous consumption,' a sort of 'showing off,' the more so when it is of Western-originated goods and signifiers. In the call for papers for a 2014 conference on 'Conspicuous Consumption in Africa' hosted at the University of Cape Town, the organisers posited that the notion of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2007) was most relevant for framing 'aspiration, acquisition and conspicuous display' in Africa because:

There are some striking resemblances between the America of the late nineteenth century that Veblen was writing about, and many parts of Africa today: buoyant economic growth, rampant and loosely regulated accumulation, along with rapid upward mobility in the higher reaches of the society coupled with abiding or deepening poverty and marginality for most, within states doing little to manage or ameliorate the inequalities (Posel and Van Wyk, 2014).

Beyond disagreeing with a historicist emplotting of the African present which, among other things, implies the kind of stories of originals and copies that we have already problematized, we would continue to insist that both as practice and logic, extravagant materialism and display are neither new nor imported. The Veblenian concept of conspicuous consumption has also been subjected to critique in itself (Kistner, 2015). For present purposes, we will only note that it offers a rather structuralist account of a social imperative to communicate material status above all, and carries more than a whiff of Calvinist judgement about the 'wastefulness' or 'non-industry' of the whole affair.

Historical, anthropological and also political science literatures on Africa offer a range of alternate and/or complementary conceptual frames to situate what it is that Africans are doing when they expend extravagantly. Scholars of Yoruba culture, for instance, have noted that within the culture there is an imperative to not only accumulate money or disburse it in ways that might look industrious to a capitalist eye. There is also an imperative to *spend* money including, quite centrally, by way of hosting others and distributing gifts (Bascom, 1951; Boyer, 1983). The moral Yoruba subject:

must spend money on his [*sic*] house and on his clothes so that he can be well dressed. He must spend money on entertaining at the time of his annual religious ceremony, contribute generously to the ceremonies and funerals of his close relatives by birth and marriage, and entertain his guests and the members of his club in a manner befitting his means. A principal rule of Yoruba hospitality is that a man must offer food and drink to anyone who comes to visit him (Bascom 1951, 496).

Suzanne Gott writes of the importance of feminine fashionability in the traditional Asante cultural practice of *poatwa*, or 'sumptuary competitive display' (Gott, 2009: 147) While it is certainly a sign or display of class status, it is also one of feminine maturity, respectability, initiative and discernment; in short a sign that one is a 'big woman.' And it is *expected*: 'It is generally said that a woman who fails to wear a sufficient number of good-quality African-print ensembles or who wears only the cheaper grades of African-print cloth will be 'laughed at,' or ridiculed' (Gott 2009, 158). Among other things, this demands that women accumulate textiles, and as many other scholars have also noted of other West African contexts, including **M. Amah Edoh** in her chapter in this book, this accumulation becomes a form and source of feminine wealth. It is not just consumption, but also investment: accumulated luxury textiles represent a form of durable wealth than be passed on to future generations.

Much more than the figure of the big woman it is, of course, that of 'big man' that has been discussed and theorized extensively in Africanist scholarship, most notably for his exercise and consolidation of political power through material splendour, display and patronage (Bayart, 1993; Mbembé, 2001). Achille Mbembe has argued that, in the African 'postcolony,' the display of power:

must be extravagant, since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele; it must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in dress and lifestyle, turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theatre (Mbembé, 2001: 109).

According to Mbembe, this aesthetic of power, or indeed domination, very much includes waste. To this, **Jonathan Cane's** contribution to the book, on the palatial gardens of 'big men' like Mobutu Sese Seko adds the complex case of 'ruination.'

That an aesthetic and even rationality of waste may be part of luxury consumption and display in Africa is different from the moralized position that we touched upon above in reference to Veblen, that luxury is by definition waste, obscene, and so on. As we see it, this kind of view may have a particular readiness and charge when it comes to Africa *because* it is Africa: because of the overwhelming poverty there, but also because of equally ready assumptions that, where there *is* wealth, it must be a product of corruption. **Claudia Gastrow** shows, in her contribution to the book, how such suspicions complicate local perceptions of luxury housing estates in Luanda. Questionable and outright illegal sources of wealth in Africa must be critiqued unreservedly. Our point of caution here is that it should not be always already assumed that corruption is the cause when Africans have, acquire or flaunt wealth, and that scholarly critiques should not begin or end with moralisms, including judgements of good and bad taste.

In Africa as much as elsewhere, luxury *does things*: it forges subjectivities, as shown by Alexia Smit's chapter on the role of luxury in televised romance discourses, and builds communities, as shown by Pamila Gupta's chapter on the makers and consumers of Marigold necklaces; it produces spaces, as shown by Jonathan Cane's chapter on the design and ruination of elite luxury gardens; it

shapes and defines cultural practices, such as explored in M. Amah Edoh's chapter on the marketing of Vlisco waxcloth, and it mediates social positions, as shown by Ndapwa Alweendo and Simidele Dosekun's chapter on the narratives of success shared by black women luxury shoppers. What, how and for whom luxury operates are the kinds of questions that concern us in this collection, not whether luxury in Africa is good or bad, if Africans have the mere right to it, or what the moral character of those among us who indulge in luxury may be. Seeing luxury as just one of the many sites and practices through which African identities, materialities and signs are made, communicated and contested, our aim in this book is to provide rich and theorized accounts of its textures and effects. This calls for an interdisciplinary approach. Just as consumption is not mere sociological fact, so too is luxury more than simply an agglomeration of economic and political factors. It is also about beauty, pleasure, craft and style. Our particular focus in this book is on the politics and aesthetics of African luxury.

The discourses, practices and spaces of African luxury

African Luxury brings together nine chapters from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives including anthropology, cultural geography, media studies and cultural history, and from diverse areas of the continent as we have already noted. Grouped into three closely interconnected sections, across which the core analytic insights resonate and build, these chapters advance a discussion about mediated, especially visual representations of luxury in or for Africa; the diverse material practices and forms of labour that shape and constitute it, from gardening to brand management to craft; and the spaces in which African luxury is located and performed.

Under the rubric of 'Africa Risen,' the first section of the book brings together three chapters that concern both external and internal visions and projections of what Africans' luxury consumption does or will or could look like. Africa is the 'new frontier' for luxury marketing and brands, indeed the final one, according to the corporate briefs and reports of leading global consulting firms such as KPMG and Bain & Company that **Mehita Iqani** critically analyses. She shows that while speaking of Africa in terms of the new, these reports recycle old Western visions of it as a largely undifferentiated place to be conquered or penetrated for profit, and where desires for Western brands can be presumed. **Hlonipha Mokoena** offers what she calls a retrogressive reading of a 2001 advertising campaign in South Africa by the denim brand, Diesel, that depicts an Africa now topmost in the world, an Africa that extends charity to the West while its citizens luxuriate in hedonistic lifestyles. While seemingly 'Afro-optimist,' the advert campaign continues colonial negations of the historical wealth of Africa, Mokoena argues, including in its implicit suggestions that Africans do not know what to do (read: tastefully) with our 'new money.' Luxury is more aspirational than achieved in the case study that **Alexia Smit** presents, of the South African reality television show, *Date My Family*. Nonetheless, the politics of 'good taste' versus 'excess,' and also 'realness' versus 'fakeness,' also come to the fore. Smit shows how the democratic/democratising promise of love and romance is interwoven with that

of luxury commodities on the show, and thereby (re)confirmed as tempered and bounded by class and the 'world of things,' in practice. To put it quite simply, if love looks like a Mercedes Benz, not just anyone need apply.

The chapters in section II, 'Re/Crafting African Style,' present three sets of diverse cases, sites and agents engaged in multifarious forms of labour and value-creation to render 'African things' luxurious. Based on fieldwork in Holland and Togo, **M. Amah Edoh** offers an ethnographic account of how the Dutch company, Vlisco, has sought recently to rebrand and reposition as a global luxury product its wax prints so long tailored to West African consumers and tastes that they are known widely as 'African prints.' She argues that the cloth's sedimented value derives from the longstanding investments by the very women whom the rebranding now moves to eclipse because, 'too African,' they do not have the desired look for 'the global,' much less the globally luxurious. By contrast, what does not fit the bill at Alára, a new luxury store in Lagos, is that which looks too '*un*African.' Reading and feeling her way through the store's highly aestheticized and atmospheric Instagram account, **Simidele Dosekun** argues that Alára stages itself as a kind of playground for the most moneyed and mobile of African elites to find the world of luxury at home, including via a certain re-enchantment of African arts and crafts. Luxury as 'return to craft' but not necessarily heritage – a key distinction – is the theme that **Pamila Gupta** takes up in a ruminatory ethnographic account that moves between Bulawayo and Johannesburg as, respectively, the fields of production and consumption of a line of bespoke beaded necklaces 'akin to ribbons of silk'. Reflecting upon the sensorial, affective and intersubjective value of the necklaces for women at both sites, Gupta offers a hopeful reading of them as surfacing new forms of African feminine self-making, empowerment and community.

The final section, Ambiguous Luxury Spaces, addresses the spatial manifestations and power dynamics of luxury in Africa. **Ndapwa Alweendo and Simidele Dosekun** consider the meanings of the exclusive Johannesburg store, Luminance, for black South African women.' They argue that such women's ability to buy into luxury, a post-apartheid ability, is thoroughly political even as it is not transformative or radical. Hence, they propose a conceptualization of the store as a 'crooked space' in the sense of a structurally skewed discursive, moral and material site in and through which a new black South African femininity is being fashioned. Exploring the divergent built landscapes of Luanda, **Claudia Gastrow** contrasts alternately aspirational and suspicious popular visions of the city's exclusive luxury estates with the realities of disrepair and shoddy infrastructure that lie behind their high walls. Her central argument is that the idea of luxury requires on-going maintenance, both material and reputational, in contexts of vast socio-economic inequality. The final chapter by **Jonathan Cane** continues this line of contention, that luxury contains within it the seeds of its own decay. Cane explores the ruination of three large-scale, luxurious gardening projects in central and southern Africa. Broaching landscape as process, he shows how these gardens materialise the inherent ambiguity and instability of power, and lavish lifestyles, in the postcolony.

Aspiration, style and friction in critical African luxury studies

Individually and in combination, the nine chapters in this volume make a significant, Africa-centered contribution to the nascent field of critical luxury studies, developing analytical understandings of some of the specificities of African luxury cultures in the current moment, extending and deepening more global understandings of the politics of luxury, and also pointing to new avenues for further research. We would summarise the conceptual contributions of the book as a whole in terms of three intersecting themes: aspiration, style and friction.

Aspiration is key to understanding what consumption practices mean and do in contexts of stark and quite tangible economic inequality, which is a definitive characteristic of all African countries:

It is the concept of aspiration that links the otherwise binary opposites of wealth and poverty, and that allows practices of consumption, no matter how extravagant or modest, to be theorized as part of a broader picture of humanist impulses for life to be better for individuals and their loved ones (Iqani, 2016: 47)

This book shows how luxury plays into various forms of aspiration. Most obviously, there exist desires for expensive, beautiful and exclusive commodities, experiences and spaces amongst African consumers, some of whom can not necessarily afford them, or could not in the recent past. This is particularly evidenced in this volume in the chapter by Smit, in which desires for luxury lifestyles are integrated into dreams for romance; in Gastrow's chapter, where ordinary Angolans are prevented from even glimpsing how the privileged few live; and in the contribution from Alweendo and Dosekun, where women narrate their desires for high-end branded goods, indeed what they deem their right to these things, as part of their experience of political, economic and subjective transformation.

What these and others chapters show is that, as contemporarily (re)produced by and largely in service to global capitalism and consumerism, but also as a deeply historicized and localized cultural and aesthetic formation, luxury is a crucial site through which the psycho-social processes of desiring, dreaming and (self) imagining occur and are expressed. The chapters also push us to consider aspiration as not merely the junction between material possession and lack but also as mediating both social and subjective experiences of inclusion, belonging, citizenship. In turn this broadens our critical view of what it means when aspirations to luxury are denied, or moralised, or editorialised by others – more powerful others, typically. If luxury looks like a quite brute denial of citizenship and material rights for most in Gastrow's chapter, other chapters in the collection show how similar logics are also in play in more representational and ideational realms. In the chapters by Iqani, Mokoena and Edoh, for instance, what we see is that even when Africans are being represented and interpellated as partakers of luxury, the terms of our inclusion and belonging may remain qualified, and a Western supremacist narrative of African aspiration as a step in the road to 'development' may be reinscribed. Alweendo and Dosekun's chapter

shows how this also happens at more local levels, in this case intersecting with gendered visions about who should remain where, in what place.

The case studies in the book complicate easy assumptions that where it is that Africans aspire to arrive is 'Western-ness.' Likewise the book presents material that differs from views of 'lower-income consumers' as mainly interested in 'higher-status luxury objects to increase their perceived social status in the eyes of others' (Mazzocco et al., 2012: 520). In Africa luxury might look like Gucci and Prada, but also like a favoured television show, a patiently hand-loomed necklace, or a treasured length of waxprint. As such a central contribution of the book is to force us to rethink how we define and delimit luxury itself, and on whose terms. More research is required on the practices, values and priorities of African consumers, and how they define what is a luxury and what is not, in dialogue with or resistance to what is being marketed and otherwise presented as such by external actors, local brands and local elites, considerations that also call for further enquiry in their own right.

As one modality of aspiration to and inclusion in the global, as well as in themselves, style, the book shows, is central to understanding how luxury is produced, plays out and also signifies in contemporary African contexts. Style is without doubt central to many African cultures, which maintain detailed and sophisticated aesthetic sensibilities. But what the book also shows is that this style cannot be conceptualised adequately through simple, oppositional dichotomies of local/global, vernacular/imported, African/Western, but rather needs to be framed within complex and historicized frameworks of transnationalism, hybridity and heritage or tradition, and closely contextualised notions of beauty, prestige and value. The chapters by Dosekun and Gupta each show how considered, embodied and agentic forms of stylization, crafting, curating, and also investing in luxury, take place in African contexts. Conversely, Edoh's chapter suggests how much can be lost in translation when European marketing executives try to impose an external definition and vision of luxury on to existing cultures and logics of accumulation and self-styling. These chapters and others point toward a crucial research trajectory that considers Africa as a contemporary source of luxury consumer cultures, items and tastes, and not simply their destination, and that asks to what extent this is bound up with but in some ways also exceeds or escapes the dominant dictates and directional flows of global capital.

Finally, the chapters in this book also open up space for thinking about forms of tension and even disappointment that necessarily attend luxury in African contexts – and more globally, because *inherently*. The experience of luxury consumption, or the creation of a luxury discourse or aesthetic, is never smooth and uncompromised. It always includes some kind of contradiction, which, following Anna Tsing (2012), we find it fruitful to name "friction" in the sense of the resistance, tension, even jumpiness that accompany the making and coming into contact of diverse bodies, trajectories, worlds.¹ The luxury condominium in

¹ Tsing's (2012) conceptualisation of friction is in reference to globalisation specifically, and articulated against the globalisation theorists who claimed that the world was smoothly and seamlessly coming together as one.

Luanda may regularly have its water and power cut off; the luxury car navigating unpaved streets in a South African township is promptly splattered with mud; the strongman is deposed and his palatial estates fall into decay and disuse. The frictions necessarily extend to the labour that subtends luxury. From the Bulawayo beading cooperative discussed by Gupta in this book to the workers at Alára invisibilized as players, the labour of luxury in Africa requires more research. In addition to the elite African actors who make luxury their business, who exactly works in luxury spaces? Who crafts, stitches or manufactures the products labelled, and priced, luxurious? How much of these employment practices are rooted in African contexts, and how and where do they stretch beyond these places?

How aspiration, style and friction continue to play out in the makings and meanings of luxury in Africa, the global south and beyond, should remain on the agenda for future critical inquiry. This book shows that African luxury is multi-faceted, locally constructed as well as globally influenced, and that it ties into numerous political, cultural, economic and social structures and flows endemic to African cities, cultures and political sensibilities. Far from being mimetic of Western styles and cultures as writers fixated on the “conspicuousness” of African consumption would have it, luxury in Africa speaks to deeply dignified histories of style, wealth and beauty, expert craftsmanship and worldly, aspirational forms of material culture, as well as the politics of how luxury often fails to live up to its promises. Just as it does elsewhere on the globe, in African contexts luxury shapes spaces, discourses, and practices in ways both linked to and separate from historic inequalities. As the field of critical luxury studies evolves, it will be crucial to find a balance between recognising the uniquely African factors and conditions that help us to understand luxury in ever more complex ways, and identifying the resonances and qualities of luxury that cross borders, temporalities and subjectivities in increasingly similar ways. This book aims to – and we believe succeeds in – putting Africa on the luxury map in a way that recognises these complexities. It also sounds the call for opening up progressive and exciting new research agendas concerned with the meanings and importance of African iterations of wealth, elite consumption, design, style and taste.

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